Texas House of Representatives
Committee on Higher Education
Interim Charge 4, Request for Information
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Amanda Rockow
Vice President, Public Affairs
University of Texas at Dallas
800 W. Campbell Road, AD 12
Richardson, TX 75080
972-883-2107
arockow@utdallas.edu

UT Dallas Response

1. **What are the existing barriers to online learning for students and faculty? What have institutions done to alleviate and eliminate these barriers?**

Barriers to online learning for UT Dallas students include preference for a residential college experience, reliable internet connectivity, physical environment limitations, device or software challenges, and potential struggles with timely access to faculty or peers. Barriers to online learning for UT Dallas faculty members include reliable internet connectivity, physical environment limitations, unfamiliarity with technology, and potential struggles with active timely engagement with students. Barriers for UT Dallas, like many institutions, include sufficient financial resources to acquire additional technology on a larger scale.

UT Dallas, like most institutions, tried to acquire and issue hotspots, webcams, and laptops to assist students with technological needs. The University was able to secure webcams for classrooms relatively easily, but the webcams to provide students had to be backordered due to national demand. UT Dallas offered extensive training to faculty in online pedagogy, including intentional online course design, curricular modifications, altered evaluations and assessments, and technical assistance. The University also entered into inter-institutional software contracts and purchasing.

Bureaucracy itself can be a barrier. Internal policies, accreditation guidelines, state law, and federal regulations all needed adjustments, and while most of those came when needed since the onset of COVID-19 in the U.S., not all of the requests for state statute exceptions have been answered. In addition, the lingering federal rules regarding online courses for international students remains an issue in a global pandemic. International students also still face barriers with visa issues and with time zone differences from the institutions in which they are enrolled. UT Dallas is among institutions that implemented an asynchronous option for each course offered to assist with time zone, technology access, and/or student work schedule challenges.

2. **What information and data is available regarding long-term student success for those taking courses primarily online -- both in general and specific to Texas institutions?**

UT Dallas has not traditionally offered a multitude of online courses. With that in mind, most of the University's programs have not offered online courses long enough to determine long-term student success at this point; however, the programs that have developed intentional online courses and offered those for years have student success outcomes (retention, persistence, and graduation rates) equal to traditional or blended instruction. These courses and programs are assessed annually in the same manner as face-to-face or blended instruction.

3. **With institutions having shifted instruction to online-only in the Spring of 2020 because of the pandemic, what lessons have been learned?**

Among the most important lesson learned is that institutions of higher education have the ability to be nimble and responsive. Another key lesson learned is that a "one size fits all" solution does not exist in higher education. Local flexibility—and in this context, even within the universities—is key to being responsive to a dynamic situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. To effectively implement this flexibility, collaboration and communication across institutional units are a must. Institutions also learned what it is about college that is important to students and to parents, and they learned to adapt co-curricular programming to reflect some of these new priorities. Institutions learned some of their own bureaucratic red tape could be reduced, and they learned that external agencies could do the same. The crisis revealed and exacerbated structural problems and inequities that already weaken institutions of higher education.

University leadership employed a shared-governance model that respected faculty decisions on how to most effectively teach and care for students, respected staff to do their jobs without constant oversight, and respected students to make their own choices about asynchronous learning and varied course modalities. This approach, dubbed by some faculty leaders as a "respect first and compassion a close second" approach helped the campus community foster better buy-in for the decisions made. Faculty members were encouraged to develop their courses asynchronously first and adjust from that for the in-person or virtual synchronous sessions. This was a completely new concept for most faculty members, but the required asynchronous course option provides the ability and flexibility for students and faculty to pivot fully online more easily, if needed, in the event of escalating health concerns.

4. **What are the challenges related to technology, quality, accessibility or other considerations? The Committee is seeking the perspectives of college/university administration, faculty and students.**

After transitioning to remote learning, UT Dallas students indicated that the lack of their usual daily schedule and accountability caused them to feel less motivated to stay current with coursework. Many students experienced significant disruption due to losing their jobs and income, needing to seek alternative employment, or suddenly being required to work longer and more unpredictable hours often with insufficient access to childcare. Students concerns with technology were typically due to not owning adequate technology (laptop/computer,

laptop/computer that can support certain program-specific software, access to a webcam, etc.) or not having the proper resources to operate technology (reliable WiFi/internet connection). There are also concerns with having to share technology with other household members and thus not having enough time to complete tasks. While many programs have been put into place to help mitigate some of the shortcomings of the technology, students are still struggling even if they have been provided with the adequate resources. Some of these struggles include students having a difficult time finding a quiet space in their home to attend a virtual class or do homework, finding motivation to be attentive in classes, and even struggling because they are in a different time zone. With many going through difficult financial times, possibly due to losing one or multiple sources of income from layoffs or reduced hours due to the pandemic, students may have to choose between taking classes or paying rent. This can lead to some students ultimately deciding to not enroll this semester, take a reduced load, or just be generally less satisfied with the quality of education being offered.

With the initial pivot to remote learning in the spring, many UT Dallas faculty had to use their personal devices, which often were insufficient for the new demands. Both initially and still, faculty also lacked childcare and were overwhelmed by the amount of work required to suddenly transition to remote teaching. Now that the faculty have had more time to prepare, some of these issues remain: namely that technology continues to be an issue because it sometimes fails and while they may have learned how to use the technology, trouble-shooting still goes beyond their comfort level in many cases.

A small percentage of faculty has been resistant to incorporating technology into instruction because their teaching style did not deem it a necessity in the past. When the pivot to online learning came, it was difficult for some to understand the concept/need for the technologies, let alone the practical uses of them. The UT Dallas technology training group had to step back and raise awareness of the fundamentals. Although not universal, this mindset among those faculty members was significant and real, and this put a small educational technology staff in the position of having to offer rudimentary, intermediate, and advanced trainings all at once.

5. **Post-pandemic, will the recent shift to online courses lead to expanded online demand and capacity?**

Capacity-yes; demand-possibly, though this likely will be based on level of student and discipline. Institutions might also see the inverse effect in that the forced shift to remote learning may make students crave the face-to-face interactions more. This could depend on how long the pandemic lasts. At UT Dallas, the student demand for online undergraduate courses already exceeded supply. With growing comfort among faculty to offer online or hybrid instruction, there certainly exists the possibility that additional virtual offerings will be permanent.

6. **How can the Legislature address gaps in equity in accessing reliable, affordable Internet access?**

Follow the example of other states, but focus on internet deserts in both urban and rural communities. (See https://www.wistv.com/2020/07/22/least-k-sc-households-receive-mobile-hotspots-monthly-internet-service-students/) Increase cell tower infrastructure, and engage in a

widespread education campaign of how to use hotspots. Consider statewide contracts for some licensing for software/needed technologies.

7. **What sort of differences in quality are we seeing for online nursing programs without a clinical component versus those that do have one or are done in person?** Not applicable to UT Dallas.

8. **What sort of privacy exists for students utilizing some of the more popular online curriculum packages?**

The online curriculum packages are mostly for secondary schools; however, privacy concerns exist for students and families at all levels. At UT Dallas, all software used for classes goes through a vigorous security review with software contracts including FERPA addendums. Providing resources to institutions to have a privacy officer role could assist institutions in staying on top of ever-evolving technology and privacy issues.

9. **Has recently adopted legislation on Open Educational Resources been able to make an impact on the quality of online education yet?**

It is too early for UT Dallas to have measurable evidence of the impact of the OER legislation on quality online education.

10. **Do small and rural community colleges have the financial capability to switch to online, as well as in-person, classes, degrees, etc.?** Not applicable to UT Dallas.

11. **How does the impact of COVID-19 affect the small and rural community college's ability to offer online classes and make other changes to adapt to the pandemic?** Not applicable to UT Dallas.